

# Continental intra-arc depressions: A nonextensional model for their origin, with a Proterozoic example from Wopmay orogen

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## ABSTRACT

The 1.875–1.86 Ga Great Bear Magmatic Zone is a linear belt, 100 km wide by 800 km long, of low  $\text{TiO}_2$ , high  $\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3$  volcanic rocks ranging continuously from basalt to rhyolite, cut by allied hornblende-biotite-bearing plutonic rocks. Comprehensive study of the facies, volcanic styles, chemistry, and petrography indicates that it is similar to Cenozoic continental arcs. Preservation of high-level volcanic rocks suggests that the zone never had an unusually thick crust and therefore is similar to some intra-arc depressions, such as the Mesozoic-Paleogene depression of Chile, common in younger continental arcs. These long, linear depressions are the sites for voluminous pyroclastic volcanism, contain sections tens of kilometres thick, and are zones of subsidence whose surface remains close to sea level. They originate when the mass of basaltic andesite arriving at the base of the crust equals the mass of vitric ash removed from the areas by high-level atmospheric transport during ash-flow eruptions.

## INTRODUCTION

The term “Andean-type continental margin” is used to refer to a continental margin beneath which an oceanic plate is subducted to form a magmatic arc located upon the overriding continent. This has led to the general notion that continental arcs are zones of crustal thickening and uplift due to underplating by large volumes of mafic magma rising out of the mantle. Here we compare the Great Bear Magmatic Zone, an early Proterozoic continental volcanic arc located in the Wopmay orogen, to younger continental margin arcs, and we suggest that they are not necessarily zones of crustal thickening and uplift but, rather, low-lying regions containing broad areas of subsidence. We develop a model to explain the subsidence in terms of mass balance between mafic magma rising into the crust and siliceous ash removed from the areas by high-level atmospheric transport.

## GREAT BEAR MAGMATIC ZONE

The Great Bear Magmatic Zone (1.875–1.86 Ga) occupies about 40,000 km<sup>2</sup> in the western part of the Wopmay orogen, an early Proterozoic north-trending, multicollisional orogen exposed in the northwestern Canadian Shield (Hoffman, 1980). The orogen is divisible into three major tectonic elements: the Coronation margin, the Great Bear Magmatic Zone, and the Hottah terrane (Fig. 1).

The Coronation margin comprises, in ascending order, initial rift volcanic and sedimentary rocks, siliciclastics and carbonates of a west-facing passive continental margin (Hoffman, 1980), and northwesterly derived fore-deep deposits. These rocks were thrust eastward toward the Slave craton (Tirrul, 1983). In the western part of the margin, continental rise-prism rocks were strongly metamorphosed and intruded by numerous syntectonic peraluminous plutons (St-Onge et al., 1982).

The Hottah terrane, exposed only near the southeast corner of Great Bear Lake, is a belt of polydeformed metasedimentary and metavol-

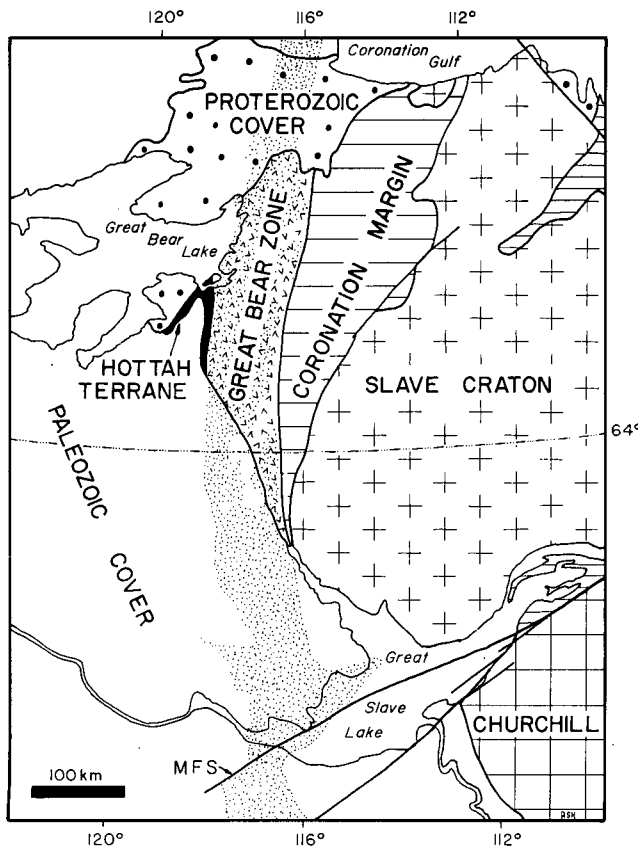


Figure 1. Location of major tectonic zones of Wopmay orogen. Dotted pattern shows extent of 200–300  $\gamma$  aeromagnetic high associated with Great Bear Magmatic Zone. MFS = MacDonald-Wilson fault system, a post-arc dextral transcurrent fault.

canic rocks, intruded by a diverse suite of deformed plutons ranging from diorite to granite. The terrane is considered to be a microcontinent, exotic with respect to the Coronation margin on the basis of geologic and geochronological evidence, beneath which attempted subduction of the leading edge of the Slave craton took place (Hildebrand et al., 1983).

Rocks of the Great Bear Magmatic Zone unconformably overlie both the Coronation margin and the Hottah terrane and bury the inferred suture between the two. In general, the zone comprises thick sequences of dominantly subaerial volcanic rocks, ranging continuously from basalt to rhyolite (Hildebrand, 1982) and mostly nonmarine sedimentary rocks cut by gregarious biotite-hornblende-bearing plutons, many of which are coeval with the volcanic rocks.

Voluminous intermediate to siliceous ash-flow tuffs and locally thick piles of andesite-basaltic andesite (high-Al basalt) dominate the supracrustal rocks. Many of the ash-flow tuffs can be related to specific cauldron complexes (Hildebrand, 1981, 1983). The Great Bear Magmatic Zone does not contain many synvolcanic faults, except ring-fracture systems, nor does it contain much in the way of coarse clastic detritus.

Magmatic rocks of the zone are chemically similar to Cenozoic suites classified as calc-alkaline (Fig. 2). In addition, calcic clinopyroxenes and amphiboles found in the andesitic rocks are similar to those occurring in younger high-K, calc-alkalic andesites. Rare-earth-element (REE) analyses of rocks from andesite to rhyolite exhibit light-REE enrichment patterns and the high overall abundances typical of high-K continental volcanic arcs (Hildebrand, 1982).

As exposed, the Great Bear Magmatic Zone is about 100 km wide by 400 km long, but it likely is at least 800 km long, as it forms a conspicuous linear aeromagnetic high (200–300  $\gamma$  above that of surrounding rocks) of almost constant width that shows through thin Paleozoic and Proterozoic sedimentary cover at both its northern and southern limits of exposure (Fig. 1). The facies, eruptive styles, mineralogy, chemistry, and great linearity of the Great Bear Magmatic Zone indicate that it is part of an early Proterozoic continental volcanic arc.

#### Synclinal Basins of Continental Magmatic Arcs

The preservation of stratovolcanoes and other high-level volcanic rocks in the Great Bear Magmatic Zone suggests that the region never had an unusually thick crust and was probably subsiding during volcanism, because if the crust was abnormally thick, then the vol-

canic rocks would have been quickly eroded due to isostatic uplift. While continental volcanic arcs often have parts, or individual stratovolcanoes, that are topographically high-standing, most do not have the thick crust of the Peruvian Andes but have normal 30–35-km-thick crust and commonly contain large areas of subsidence. Recent work by Knight and Murphy (1980) and Feininger (1983) and maps by Cobbing (1981) imply that the cause of the unusually thick crust in the Peruvian Andes is not due to underplating but more probably to a pre-arc collision of a west-facing passive margin sequence with one or more exotic terranes.

The structure and volcanism of the Great Bear Magmatic Zone display remarkable similarities to a type of depression found in some continental volcanic arcs: the Mesozoic-Paleogene volcanic belt of Chile (Zeil, 1979; Levi and Aguirre, 1981), the coastal lowlands of Hokkaido, Japan (Oide, 1968), and possibly the "graben-synclines" of Kamchatka (Erlich, 1968). The depressions, which lay at elevations close to sea level for many millions of years, indicating that they remained in isostatic equilibrium, are about 100 km across and several hundred kilometres long and are loci for voluminous pyroclastic eruptions and cauldrons.

The depressions are not continental rifts in the classic sense. Although faulting is common, there is little evidence, if any, for the listric normal faulting and concomitant rotation of crustal blocks that seem to characterize continental rifts such as the western Basin and

Range province and the Afar region. Instead, the regional structure of the depressions is generally that of huge synclines of volcanic and sedimentary rocks tens of kilometres in apparent thickness. In the Mesozoic-Paleogene depression of Chile, for example (Fig. 3), the sections comprise a series of overlapping lenses whose aggregate thickness exceeds that of the crust (Levi and Aguirre, 1981). Within the Great Bear Magmatic Zone stratigraphic thicknesses are in excess of 35 km.

#### Origin of Continental Arc Magmatism

There can be little doubt that batholiths and associated siliceous volcanic rocks of continental margin arcs are generated dominantly in the crust, for in volcanic arcs built on oceanic crust there are no batholiths comparable to those of western North and South America, only small intrusions of tonalite, trondhjemite, and plagiogranite (Waters, 1948; Bateman, 1981). In this regard, the Kurile-Kamchatka and Aleutian-Alaska Peninsula arcs are particularly instructive because both pass longitudinally from oceanic to continental crust. On continental crust, volcanic products are much richer in silica and incompatible elements, much greater amounts of pyroclastic material are erupted in the form of ash-flows, and large composite batholiths are emplaced into the volcanic suprastructure. These are fundamental differences that clearly indicate that continental crust is involved in the generation of batholiths and their related eruptive products. A similar conclusion is reached from study of isotopic data from

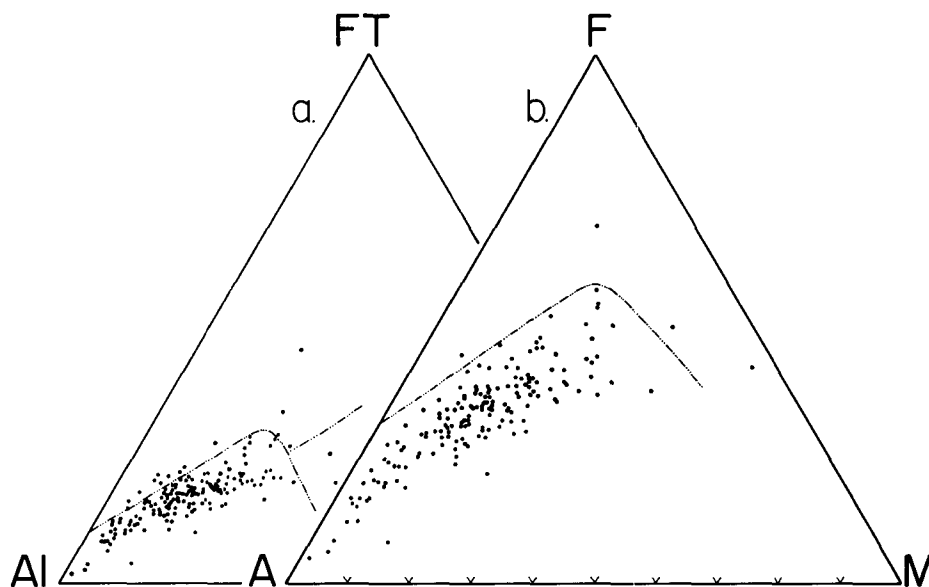


Figure 2. a: Jensen (1976) cation plot of rocks from Great Bear Zone; Al =  $\text{Al}_2\text{O}_3$ , FT =  $\text{FeO} + \text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3 + \text{TiO}_2$ ; b: AFM diagram for same rocks; tholeiitic-calc-alkaline dividing line from Irvine and Baragar (1971).

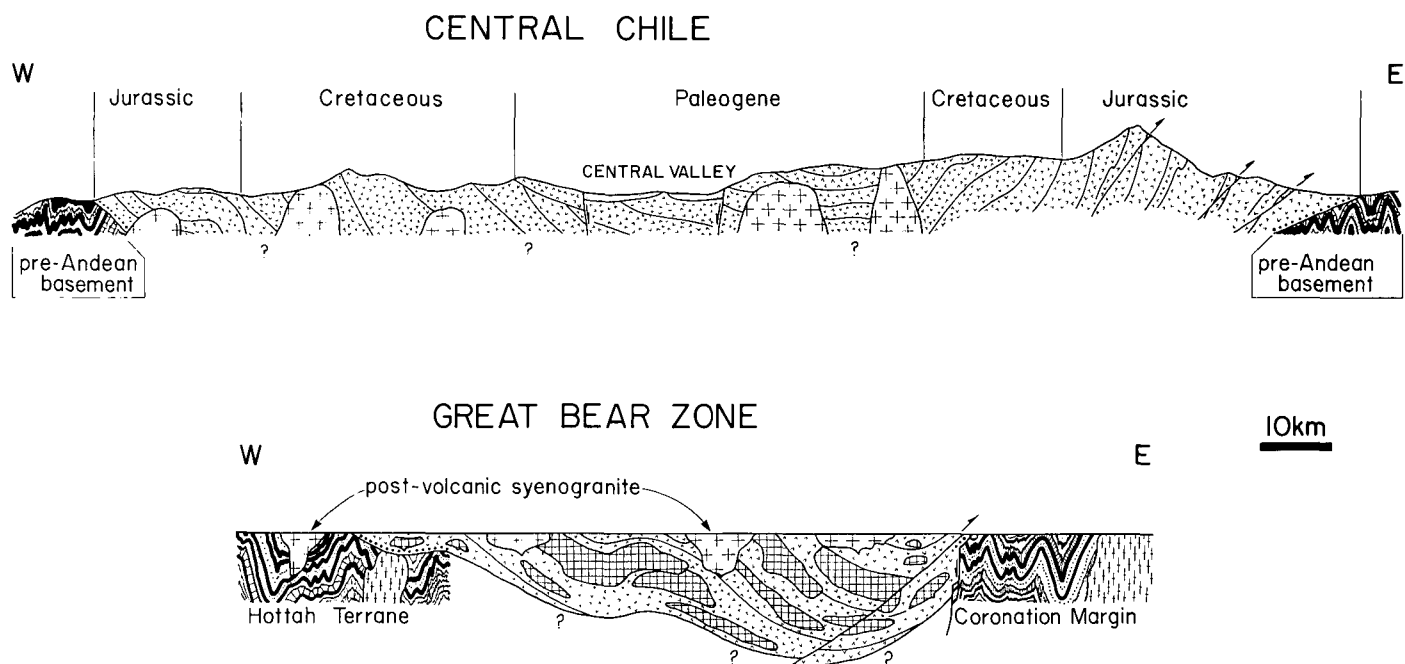


Figure 3. Schematic cross sections comparing Mesozoic-Paleogene depression of Chile (from Levi and Aguirre, 1981) with Great Bear Magmatic Zone (from Hoffman, unpub.).

continental arcs (Zartman, 1974; Carter et al., 1978; Tilton and Barreiro, 1980; DePaolo, 1981; James, 1981) as well as experimental phase petrology (Wyllie et al., 1976; Wyllie, 1977) and petrological considerations (Presnall and Bateman, 1973).

Yet, ever since it was recognized that parts of the continental crust are enriched in radiogenic  $^{87}\text{Sr}$  relative to the upper mantle (Faure and Hurley, 1963), it has been argued that batholiths of continental arcs with low initial  $^{87}\text{Sr}/^{86}\text{Sr}$  were mantle derived. However, low initial Sr ratios do not by themselves indicate a direct mantle origin. For example, there are several mechanisms for deriving magmas with low initial  $^{87}\text{Sr}/^{86}\text{Sr}$  other than direct melting of the mantle. These include (1) melting of juvenile continental crust ultimately derived from the mantle; (2) melting of lower crustal rocks with low Rb/Sr, such as depleted granulites (Heier, 1973); (3) melting lower continental crust that has isotopically re-equilibrated, perhaps with the aid of a fluid phase, with the large mantle reservoir (Armstrong, 1968; Col- lerson and Fryer, 1978); and (4) mixing of crustally derived magmas with magmas derived from mantle material.

In light of the above, we find it difficult to accept the view, based mainly on strontium-isotope data, that batholiths of continental arcs and their consanguineous volcanic rocks are generated directly in the mantle (Brown and

Hennessey, 1978; Atherton et al., 1979; Thorpe et al., 1979; Cobbing and Dennis, 1982). An example of mechanism 4 is found in the Holocene Edgecumbe volcanic field of southeast Alaska, where hybrid melts, generated by the influx of mantle-derived basalt into sialic crust, partial melting of that crust, and subsequent mixing to produce rhyodacite, andesite, and dacite, all have initial  $^{87}\text{Sr}/^{86}\text{Sr}$  less than 0.7048 (Myers and Marsh, 1981).

The Sm-Nd isotopic system used in conjunction with Rb-Sr isotopes apparently rules out the possibility that batholiths of continental arcs are derived from old continental crust with low Rb/Sr ratios (see DePaolo, 1981) but does not rule out possibilities 1, 3, and 4 above. Even the Lu-Hf isotopic system apparently cannot rule out possibilities 1 and 4 if the juvenile crust is less than 150 m.y. old (Patchett et al., 1981).

If much of the magmatism of continental volcanic arcs is generated by crustal anatexis, as suggested here, then the mechanism of melting must be consistent with an unthickened crust, subsidence, and epizonal plutonism—all of which we suggest are characteristic of continental volcano-plutonic arcs. The crust can be melted by crustal thickening due to thrusting, folding, or underplating, by addition of water, or by the influx of hot, mafic magma. Addition of mafic magma appears to be the only mechanism capable of creating the observed magma-

tism, because crustal thickening will lead to uplift while addition of water will create melts that are unable to rise to high crustal levels. Therefore, we adopt the view that mafic magma, similar in origin and composition to island-arc basaltic andesite (high-alumina basalt), rises into the lower crust and causes widespread partial melting. Calculations by Marsh (1983) suggest that under most conditions basalt emplaced into the lower crust, especially in the form of multiple intrusions, may contain enough energy to generate an equivalent or greater volume of siliceous magma (see also Patchett, 1980).

#### Origin of the Synclinal Basins

If, as we suggested earlier, the synclinal basins do indeed form a distinct class of basins formed in continental arcs, and they do not originate by extension, to what do they owe their origin? We suggest that the mechanism may be crustal sagging, or downwarping, due mostly to loss of material out of the immediate vicinity of the basins by airfall associated with the voluminous ash-flow tuff eruptions (Fig. 4).

Consider that during ash-flow eruptions as much as half the erupted volume occurs as fine vitric ash that rises to great heights in the atmosphere as a turbulent cloud and ultimately is widely dispersed by high-level wind (Fisher, 1966; Walker, 1981; Flood et al., 1980; Izett, 1981). Consider also that the average center

may erupt between 300 and 600 km<sup>3</sup> of material and each synclinal basin contains many such centers. Therefore, the volume of ash-flow tuff present in the synclines is on the order of tens of thousands, perhaps even hundreds of thousands of cubic kilometres.

Because the synclinal basins under consideration here are topographically low-standing features located close to sea level, and have remained so for many millions of years after volcanism ceases, the crust in the areas probably was not thickened by underplating and remained in isostatic equilibrium. If the relative mass of material added to the crust from below is less than that lost from the areas by atmospheric transport, there would be a net loss of crustal material from the area of the surface volcanism, leading to subsidence. If the mass of material added to the crust is larger than that lost, the crust would be thickened and tend to rise isostatically because basalt is less dense than mantle peridotite. Thus, in order for the regions to remain at more or less the same elevations with respect to sea level, the mass of basaltic andesite added to the crust must equal the mass of vitric ash erupted and removed from the immediate area. Approximate values for the density of basaltic andesite are about 2.5 g/cm<sup>3</sup> in the temperature range of 1200–1400 °C, whereas those for rhyolitic melts at 800 °C are about 2.3 g/cm<sup>3</sup> (Murase and McBirney, 1973). The density difference between the two is about 8% and therefore the two volumes must be about equal. The lower crust will, in all likelihood, become denser as the basaltic andesite crystallizes to mafic

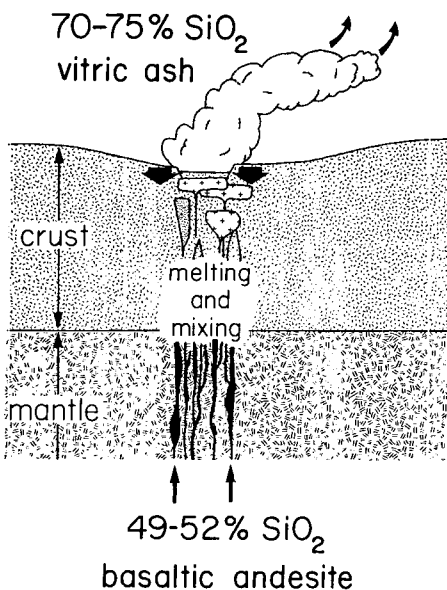


Figure 4. Illustration of model for origin of intra-arc synclinal basins.

granulite—a rock denser than partial melts generated by the influx of basaltic andesite. However, the middle and upper crust may become less dense as a result of the migration and crystallization of less dense magmas generated in the deep crust. Without knowing the composition of the crustal column it is impossible to evaluate these effects quantitatively. Nevertheless, the mass of material added to the crust must still approximate the mass of material lost if the region is to remain in isostatic equilibrium. We consider that the amount of magma arriving at the base of the crust in continental arcs is similar to the volume of magma erupted and intruded in modern island arcs. Estimates for this volume range between 1 and 10 km<sup>3</sup>/m.y./km of arc (Marsh, 1979).

Our model is consistent with the pyroclastic eruption rates in well-mapped parts of volcanic arcs such as the San Juan volcanic field, southwestern Colorado, a 100-km-long segment of an arc of Tertiary age extending southward to the Sierra Madre Occidental (Lipman, 1980). Steven and Lipman (1976) estimated that in the San Juan volcanic field about 9,000 km<sup>3</sup> of pyroclastic ejecta were erupted between 30 and 22 m.y. ago. That is equivalent to a rate of about 1,100 km<sup>3</sup> m.y.<sup>-1</sup> or 11 km<sup>3</sup>/km. Therefore, as much as 5.5 km<sup>3</sup> of vitric ash may have been erupted out of the region for every 1 km/m.y. This approximation is well within the estimated range of eruption and intrusion in island arcs developed on oceanic crust.

Francis and Rundle (1976) estimated the volume of ash-flow tuff present in a 115-km-long section of the central Andes to be  $1.5 \times 10^3$  km<sup>3</sup> and arrived at a rate of production equal to 1.3 km<sup>3</sup> m.y.<sup>-1</sup> km<sup>-1</sup>. Although they were aware that ash flows may lose 50% of their volume by high-level atmospheric transport, their calculations were based only on the volume of tuff preserved. Thus, the rate at which vitric ash was erupted and removed from the area may have been about 1.3 km<sup>3</sup> m.y.<sup>-1</sup> km<sup>-1</sup>—again a volume similar to that inferred to be arriving at the base of the crust.

## CONCLUSIONS

Our estimates for the volume of vitric ash lost from the depressions are of the same magnitude as estimates for the volume of basaltic andesite (high-Al basalt) believed, by analogy with magmatic rates in oceanic arcs, to be arriving at the base of the continental crust. Thus, the depressions are able to remain in isostatic equilibrium. The areas subside because material is constantly being removed from the lower crust and erupted onto the surface.

The calculations can also be used to place

constraints on the origin of magmatism in continental volcanic arcs. For example, since the volume of mafic magma inferred to arrive at the base of the crust is about equal to the volume of vitric ash lost, then the total volume of magma erupted and intruded in continental arcs must be even greater. Therefore, it is not possible for continental arc magmas other than basaltic andesite or perhaps andesite to be derived from mafic magmas by any type of differentiation, for about 10 volumes of mafic magma are needed to generate 2 volumes of magma with the composition of granodiorite. This argument and their consistent absence where there is no continental crust virtually demand that batholiths and their volcanic counterparts be the products of continental crust.

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#### Reviewer's comment

I really don't agree with everything in this paper, but it pulls together several fundamental concepts of arc volcanism and crustal evolution held by specialists in several, but hardly overlapping, areas.

Bruce Marsh

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